



Jessica Hagedorn

Biography

Jessica Hagedorn was born in the Philippines in 1949. Her mother's background is Scotch-Irish-French-Filipino and her father is considered Filipino-Spanish, although his great-grandmother was Chinese (Bonetti 93-95). Hagedorn considers herself a hybrid due to this assortment of nationalities (Bonetti 94). She states in *Danger and Beauty*, one of her first books of poems, that "[She is] a quintessential bastard. [Her] roots are dubious." Her mixed ethnic background has caused some of her readers to question her Asian identity, but Hagedorn links her identity to her "pure Filipino" Grandmother (Bonetti 95). She feels that her Grandmother's ethnicity played the largest role in shaping her imagination. Therefore, Hagedorn feels justified identifying herself as a Filipino writer. Critics of Hagedorn also question her legitimacy because she emigrated to the United States at such a young age. However, Hagedorn makes no claim to speak for the "generic" Filipino experience (Meer 43). Her work is directly related to her own experiences as a Filipino, first in Manila, then in the United States.

Hagedorn's family moved to San Francisco when she was fourteen-years-old. She was educated at the American Conservatory Theater (Bonetti 91) and speaks of her experience there as being unique: "The training combined disciplines like t'ai chi and martial arts with acting mime and fencing, all that Western physicality. I think it was quite a full education in theater arts, and we also got to work at night in ACT productions" (Berson 76). This kaleidoscope type education laid the foundation for Hagedorn's varied interests. She published her first book of poems in 1972, when she was only twenty. Hagedorn continued writing poetry; *Third World Women* in the early 1970s, *Dangerous Music* and *Danger and Beauty* while she was the lead singer and songwriter for the performance rock group, The West Coast Gangster Choir (later reformed to simply The Gangster Choir).



Quick Facts

- * Born in 1949
- * Filipino-American poet and novelist
- * Her works center on different aspects of Filipino-American identity

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Jessica Hagedorn

Biography continued

The band's performances were often combinations of songs and theatrical bits, directly influencing the type of multimedia plays she would later write. Hagedorn's work, however, is not exclusive to song writing and prose; she has published multimedia, poetry, short fiction, and performance art (Bonetti 91). She is also the editor of *Charlie Chan is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction*. She contributed to the making of the film *Fresh Kill*, directed by Shu Lea Cheang. And, she is intimately involved with the animated short series "Pink Palace," exploring issues that an adolescent Filipino girl might have to deal with after emigrating to the United States.

Around 1978, the San Francisco artist scene started to calm down, so Hagedorn moved to New York, which "toughened up [her] work a lot because living in New York [was] so tough" (Berson 77). There she had to adjust to a whole different sub-culture and artist scene. She returned to the Philippines in 1988 to finish her first novel, *Dogeaters*, which was published in 1990 and received the American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation. Hagedorn currently lives in New York with her husband and two daughters. Hagedorn's interest in issues surrounding the Filipino American's struggle to find a place between two cultures is reflected in her works. Rather than choosing a different theme for each piece, Hagedorn concentrates on different aspects of the Filipino American experience, whether it be finding identity, fitting into a new society, or dealing with ties to a historical home. Many of her works are not based in strict tradition; instead, she often creates multimedia works, using her talent for songwriting, poetry, prose, and drama to bring the message home.

Her mixed media style of presentation uses song, poetry, images, and spoken dialog can be seen in "Tenement Lover: no palm trees/in new york city." Hagedorn focuses on themes she had to deal with as a Filipino, both in Manila and in the United States. In this play, Hagedorn delves into the experience of being an immigrant in New York. Based on internal reactions to her own move, "Tenement Lover" explores what it is like to be placed in an alien environment and the possible results.



Jessica Hagedorn

Biography continued

“Tenement Lover” chronicles the journey of an immigrant who thinks American culture is crazy. Gradually, through images, letters, dreams, poems, and narration, Bongbong’s ability to navigate the culture gets easier, until he fully embraces it as his own. This is compared with interactions between a blond starlet type and a Filipino beachcomber/chauffer/waiter/guerilla soldier, with much different results. The Filipino, at odds with the overwhelming Western influence, rids himself of most aspects of it, picking and choosing the cultural ideals best suited to his own use.

Another example of Hagedorn’s mixed media style can be found in *Burning Heart*, a combination of poetry and black-and-white photographs. The pictures and poetry paint a raw, violent, yet at the same time deeply religious portrait of the Philippines. Hagedorn’s own difficulty with the place of her birth can be seen through the often violently disturbing photographs and poems. One photo shows a young Filipino male carrying an automatic weapon over his left shoulder pictured with a small girl in a white lace dress (Hagedorn, Roth 23). Facing this potentially violent image, Hagedorn couples a poem with an old man praying: “An old man bows his head / to pray/ in the cathedral of grandeur and sorrow / squeezing his eyes shut / palms up / earnest / beseeching / Dios ko / Dear God / Holy Mary / O Jesus” (Hagedorn, Roth 22) This seemingly desperate prayer enhances the intense stress of the “UZI MAN” photograph (Hagedorn, Roth 23). The boy with the Uzi is titled as a man, which could lead to the assumption that the old man praying may not be physically old, but aged by a struggling nation. Yet, while weapons and prostitutes are part of this creation, Hagedorn’s poetry also brings out the simple pleasures found amongst the turmoil. She writes of dancing, laughing, eating and feeling emotional joy in a place of intense heat and political upheaval. All of the black and white images are emphasized and given deeper meaning with Hagedorn’s powerful poetry. Her words highlight the details of the images and connect them with her vision of the Philippines.

Hagedorn’s vision can be found again in *Dogeaters*, a fictionalized approach to the material found in *Burning Heart*. From a junkie to a movie star, from a fifteen-year-old girl to the government, *Dogeaters* is a montage of voices reinforcing the fact that no level of society has escaped colonization’s influence.



Jessica Hagedorn

Biography continued

Throughout *Dogeaters*, there is a constant shifting of facts. Historical memories are often destroyed or deliberately misplaced, paralleling what happened to the Philippines' history when other countries suppressed and destroyed their language and religious beliefs during the colonial times. Hagedorn eloquently illustrates an image of a nation that has been shredded and put back together so many times by colonization that some of the pieces are still missing. Here, the pieces are replaced by tsismis (gossip) because there is a need for the characters to become whole. American influenced radio, television, and movie theaters can be found in every segment of the novel, but it is uncensored tsismis that ties the characters to their history. One disgruntled character's final words in the novel mimic the cry of a fragmented nation for the return of its history: "I just want you to get my damn history straight, Rio'puwede ba, it matters to me" (Hagedorn 249).



The same voices, united and effective in conveying the inescapable effects of colonization, also show off the different reactions Filipinos had to treatment under martial law in Manila. Some go about their daily lives hardly noticing the mistreatment they receive at the hands of the Marcos regime, while others actively attempt to bring about its demise. Many of the people for Marcos are wealthy importers of American culture, while most of the people suffering are on the lowest rungs of the social ladder. In the aftermath of political struggles, the wealthy usually triumph and the poor lay dormant, afraid to arouse the government, knowing that the government "[is] ready for any excuse to shoot" (Hagedorn 168).

Whether for or against the Marcos regime, most of the characters choose to identify either positively or negatively with their motherland. Some characters seek desperately for a way out of the Philippines, and do what they can to strip all aspects of Filipino culture from their lives. At the same time, there are characters that reject the default imposition of Western values upon them, and do what they can to keep from losing their heritage in American culture. Each voice has a love and hate relationship with the Filipino motherland, with all characters eventually finding meaning in their roots.



Jessica Hagedorn

Biography continued

Hagedorn's second novel, *The Gangster of Love*, can be seen as an autobiographical account again dealing with the same issues of identity found in *Dogeaters*. Published in 1996 and nominated for *The Irish Times* International Fiction Prize, *The Gangster of Love* parallels many of the events in Hagedorn's own life. Main characters Rocky and Elvis start *The Gangster of Love*, a rock group similar to Hagedorn's own music group, Gangster Choir Band. They move to New York in 1978, just as Hagedorn did, and experience many of the same problems.

Themes Hagedorn has focused on in the past are tied together in *The Gangster of Love*. Like *Dogeaters*, *The Gangster of Love* provides a series of social, religious, and linguistic portraits of characters torn between two cultures. However, *The Gangster of Love* is more like "Tenement Lover" in that it concentrates on the impact of leaving one's home country and adapting to a new one. Threaded through *Burning Heart*, "Tenement Lover," *The Gangster of Love*, and *Dogeaters*, is Hagedorn's own love and hate relationship with her homeland and her own quest for identity. Despite the fact that the focus of the conflict can be different in each work, the resolution of the problem remains the same. Going back to one's roots and reaffirming faith in the motherland and Filipino culture can ultimately provide the peace and happiness that, ironically, émigrés sought to find in the United States.

Though Jessica Hagedorn cannot be classified as any one type of artist, in each of her incarnations as poet, storyteller, musician, and playwright, she explores themes dealing with her experiences as a Filipino American searching for her place between two conflicting cultures.



Jessica Hagedorn

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